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Representation of future changes in menopausal women

Claudia Castiglione^{a*}, Orazio Licciardello^b, Alberto Rampullo^b and Chiara Campione^b^a *University of Messina, Palacultura Bartolo Cattafi, Via S. Andrea, 239, Barcellona P.G. Messina 98051, Italy.*^b *University of Catania, Department of Educational Sciences, Via Biblioteca n.4 - Palazzo Ingrassia, Catania 95124, Italy.*

Abstract

This study has investigated female representations of body physiology, emotional relationships and their professional future during the climacteric. The latter represents the biological, social, emotional and existential ‘border’ between the fertile phase and the subsequent phase, whose effects influence the representation of the self and of life planning in general. The outcome of the data analysis shows that a ‘natural’ pessimistic expectation regarding women’s body physiology confirms previous results in the literature that have documented how menopause can cause a sense of loss in women. On the other hand, however, we have also noticed a positive, future-oriented trend as far as psycho-social dimensions are concerned.

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1. Theoretical background

Adults generally look at themselves as having different personality features related to their age and they perceive a restrained but continuous change during their life span. Regarding the nature of this change in the perception of personality, Fleeson and Heckhausen (1997) highlight the fact that, by thinking of the future, individuals consider a wider range of fears and less positive expectations.

The anticipation of the future seems to suggest satisfaction and therefore a high level of well-being with one’s own self and in relation to others (Markus, & Nurius, 1986; Markus, & Ruvo, 1989).

Growing older seems to have a negative effect on one’s planning ability and the ability to imagine positive changes in the future. A study performed by Ryff (1991) has underlined how older people, compared with younger people, expect a decline for the majority of the aspects associated with well-being (for instance environmental mastery, personal growth, planning ability and positive relations with others) or no changes in relation to the present.

Middle-age is a very important period both for men and women, as it is an age that presents a series of challenges. Although there is large inter-individual variability, transitions during this period of life can be observed in two ways: either as an opportunity of change or, instead, as a stressful event and a period of decline. Heading towards one direction or another depends on the personal resources that every individual commits themselves to (Klohn, Vandewater, & Young, 1996).

* Corresponding Author : Castiglione Claudia. Tel.: +39-3333908110
E-mail address: ccastiglione@unime.it

On the whole, the majority of these transformations are experienced in a negative manner (children leaving home, ageing marks, increasing responsibilities towards elderly parents) and women experience the fundamental transition phase of menopause (Helson, & Wink, 1992).

Being both a biological and psycho-social event, today the menopause is seen as a development stage. Researchers analyse the phenomenon in terms of biological, psychological and social components and according to this conceptualisation, it has important relapses on identity, body image, on the roles in social relationships and in the vision of the future (Guaschino, & Grimaldi, 1999).

As far as the right translation of such a phase is concerned, there is debate regarding the term “menopausal syndrome”. Although menopause and climacteric are often used as synonyms, menopause refers to the stopping of menstruation, whereas the period between 45 and 55 years of age, defined as female climacteric (Guaschino, & Grimaldi, 1999), is considered the moment of transition from the fertile phase of life to the end of the ovarian function, whereby menopause is included.

Obviously, the decline of such function has an impact not only on reproductive function, but also on a large series of physical, functional, metabolic, sexual and psychological aspects, by making the single ways of life of each woman complex and extremely changeable (Volpe, Genazzani, & Cagnacci, 2003).

Therefore, research on menopause has followed two directions: medical and psycho-socio-cultural. While the first one has analysed the frequency of symptoms and has gathered a series of data about the medical manifestations regarding the stopping of ovarian activity, the second one has highlighted the diversity of menopause from an inter-cultural point of view.

According to the social approach, the construction of menopause reflects cultural dynamics (Obermeyer, & Sievert, 2007). In different societies and cultures, the idea of menopause is related to the concepts of sexuality, femininity, reproductive life and maternity. When we talk about changes that involve the individual from birth to adulthood we use the term “development” which has a positive connotation, whereas with regard to the period subsequent to menopause the term “ageing” is used, to which a negative meaning is assigned. In western cultures menopause is a synonym of loss and ageing and in some cases it is considered as a deficiency disease. From this cultural pattern a medicalized one is derived, legitimized by biomedicine and not allowing the construction of alternative patterns of identity of menopausal women.

Other studies seem to confirm what has been discussed above, that is the fact that the meaning assigned to menopause is culturally placed and it influences the way women live this delicate phase of their life (Villafuerte, Latorre, & Reyes, 2001; Kowalcsek, Rotte, Banz, & Diedrich, 2005). Feminine identity, as the masculine one, is socially built and in this process relational modes between men and women are defined. Explanations that women provide about menopause reflect, in part, their doctor’s point of view. This suggests a rather common conception of menopause as a disease within the exclusive competence of medicine and, thus, any effort to face it could seem useless (Villafuerte, Latorre, & Reyes, 2001).

The way of experiencing menopause does not depend only on the characteristics of the event, but also on other representations such as a woman’s experience, body conception shown by the myth of sexuality, of menstruations, fertility and old age. All of these constructions are socially placed and have permeated the identity of women. Living this transition phase with worry may have a negative impact on the quality of life and on life’s satisfaction levels (Sommer *et al.*, 1999; Blumel *et al.*, 2000; Mishra, & Kuh, 2006).

Conceived as a more or less natural process, the menopause represents the end of fertility and the step towards ageing, but also the freedom from pain such as menstruation. However, women experiencing the menopause may have a positive attitude towards this stage with an improvement in their well-being (Bloch, 2002; Ayers, Forshaw, & Hunter, 2010; Dennerstein, Lehert, & Guthrie, 2002; Avis, Assmann, Kravitz, Ganz, & Ory, 2004).

2. Overview of the current study

This research investigates the future representation of women’s emotional relationships and their professional future during the climacteric. The latter represents the social and emotional ‘border’ between the fertile phase and the following one, whose effects influence the representation of the woman’s self and her life planning in general.

Regarding the data obtained from scientific literature and in relation to the research design, we have hypothesized the following:

- 1) There is a better representation of future changes amongst women undergoing the menopause compared to women in the premenopausal stage;
- 2) There is a better representation of future changes amongst workers compared to housewives.

3. Method

3.1. Participants

We interviewed 188 women (age $M=45.5$, SD 3.39, range 45–55 years) residing in Eastern Sicily. The sample, which was equally distributed between workers and housewives, consisted of a mainly lower middle level of education (the proportion that had graduated from junior high school was 52.7%, graduation from senior high school was 37.2%, and those with a master's degree was 10.1%). Further, 52.1% of the sample declared themselves to be already menopausal.

3.2. Measures

The data survey has been carried out with the use of quantitative, psycho-social instruments.

I- Likert scales (ranging from -3 = *strongly disagree* to +3 = *strongly agree*; mid-point = 0) relative to possible future changes regarding emotional-relational aspects (relationships with female friends and relationship with partner).

a) *The relationship with female friends* has been analysed through the following items: 1- Importance attributed to their level of reliability, 2- Level of pleasantness of their physical skills, 3- Risk that they make sheep's eyes at other friends' partner, 4- Level of appraisal of their human and social skills.

b) *The relationship with partner*: 1- Quality of attentions towards her, 2- Possibility that he searches sexual satisfaction with other women, 3- Amount of time spent together, 4- Her being attentive towards him, 5- Possibility that he establishes sentimental relationships with other women, 6- Amount of spare time that he devotes to other activities (e.g., work, hobbies, friends).

II- Likert scales (ranging from -3 = *strongly disagree* to +3 = *strongly agree*; mid-point = 0) relative to possible future changes regarding the *working activity* (this scale has been administered only to the subgroup of female workers) (Cronbach's $\alpha = .78$), assessed by a 6-item scale: 1- Satisfaction level for achieved results, 2- Commitment in the performed activity, 3- Level of acceptability for the quality of relationships with colleagues, 4- Quality of relationships with male colleagues, 5- Quality of relationships with female colleagues, 6- Level of acceptability for the attentions addressed to her womanhood.

3.3. Procedure

In order to guarantee the quality of the data, the administration of instruments has been performed in a face to face setting..

During data processing we have calculated the reliability of the scale regarding the *working activity* through the use of variance analysis (*t* test, *post hoc*) and the distance of the value of items from the "mid-point" (*One test*).

Data analysis has been performed through SPSS v.20 for Windows software.

4. Results

4.1 Emotional relationships

With regard to those aspects concerned with relationships with a partner, our sample has assumed some

improvements.

Quality of attention paid by partners ($M=.55$, $SD\ 1.55$; $p<.001$) and towards the partners themselves ($M=.74$, $SD\ 1.57$; $p<.001$) has significantly increased, when compared to the mid-point value. We have also noticed the same result for the amount of time spent together ($M=1.10$, $SD\ 1.59$; $p<.001$). However, the time that partners spend on other activities increases as well (work, hobbies, friends, etc.) ($M=.74$, $SD\ 1.57$; $p<.001$).

Such a tendency is confirmed by a lower concern (whereby a significantly decreasing score is noticed with regards to the mid-point) that their own partner 'could look for sexual satisfaction together with other women' ($M=.40$, $SD\ 1.37$; $p<.001$), or 'could start sentimental relationships with other women' ($M=.37$, $SD\ 1.30$; $p<.001$).

Furthermore, even relationships with female friends has been characterized by a significant increase for the level of reliability, when compared to the mid-point ($M=.74$, $SD\ 1.33$; $p<.001$). We have also noticed a significant increase in the level of appreciation of their human and social skills ($M=.57$, $SD\ 1.50$; $p<.001$). However, the level of acceptability with regards to the physical skills of female friends has decreased ($M=-.46$, $SD\ 1.30$; $p<.001$).

4.2 Professional future of female workers

It can be noted that the subgroup of female workers has assumed a moderate improvement in professional activity ($M=.55$, $SD\ .97$; $p<.001$). In particular, the following levels demonstrate a significant increase when compared to their mid-point values: the satisfaction level of achieved results ($M=.74$, $SD\ 1.61$; $p<.001$), commitment in the performed activity ($M=.91$, $SD\ 1.45$; $p<.001$), the level of acceptability for the quality of relationship with colleagues ($M=.52$, $SD\ 1.47$; $p=.001$), the quality of relationship with both male ($M=.50$, $SD\ 1.26$; $p<.001$) and female colleagues ($M=.33$, $SD\ 1.31$; $p=.017$), and the level of acceptability for the attention paid to their femininity ($M=.29$, $SD\ 1.23$; $p=.026$).

5. Discussion

The menopausal condition is one of the phases of life in which every woman is called to renegotiate her own identity in terms of future representation by enriching it with new experiences.

As already hypothesized by Gergen (1979), personal experiences regarding identity are characterized by a flexible behaviour, which makes women open to alterations and changes on the basis of new personal, social and environmental requests. To this end we have found a slight increase of the dimensions concerning the quality of emotional and social relationships.

From this study it can be stated that neither of our hypotheses were confirmed. Regardless of menopausal and working status, it has been noticed that a slightly positive representation, relative to possible future changes regarding emotional-relational and *working activity* aspects, has been shown.

Therefore, the menopause represents a period of time in which many women experience changes in role, responsibility and relationships that come with the ageing process. For many women, these changes can cause a large amount of stress and affect identity, the system of one's self, as well as social and family relationships. On the contrary, as results of this study seem to suggest, for other women these changes might not have a significant effect on future change representation regarding emotional-relational and *working activity* aspects.

Future research can subdivide this sample in a different way to take into consideration perimenopausal women, in order to better understand the relationship between menopause and representation of future changes. Furthermore, the next studies to be undertaken may focus on the role of working status characteristics, and likewise, professional role and job satisfaction.

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